

‘Toxic Texts’ and Interfaith Relations: The Gospel of John and ‘the Jews’

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Introduction

All faith traditions have a high regard for their sacred texts; they are held to be of enduring authority in their capacity as normative guides for their respective faith communities. The Jewish and Christian Scriptures are no exception in this regard, with Christian faith communities embracing the biblical story as their own and as formative for their self-identity. At the same time, attempts are increasingly being made to focus on the potential linkage between the Bible and interreligious engagement. Given that, for many faith traditions, love of God and love of neighbour are core beliefs, these are then used as a springboard for dialogue. Indeed, numerous texts are drawn upon - texts that can be read in ways which provide valuable resources for interfaith encounters.

What is, however, difficult to contend with hermeneutically, particularly within the context of religious diversity and interfaith engagement, is those passages within the Bible that seem to promote violence or xenophobia as divinely sanctioned or that encourage abusive attitudes towards other human beings on the grounds of gender, social status or ethnicity. The term I use to describe such passages – ‘toxic texts’ – may strike some as uncompromising and harsh, with much depending on what is involved when speaking of textual toxicity with reference to actual and potential interpretative fields. Certainly, as far as interreligious and interfaith engagement is concerned, Jews and Christians are forced to become more and more aware of the existence of such passages in their encounters with each other as well as with other faith communities. The hermeneutical challenge facing those for whom the New Testament has a clear moral authority is now to deal with texts whose moral *heritage* is undoubtedly ambivalent. These are not texts that can be simply brushed under the carpet; they expose some difficult questions that need to be addressed.

Wrestling with ‘toxic’ or difficult texts is crucial for interfaith dialogue, that is, if dialogue is to be understood not so much as an umbrella term for a whole host of related activities but specifically to denote a direct meeting of people which involves ‘a reciprocal exposing of the full religious consciousness of the one with the “Other”’.¹ Dialogue in this sense cannot be a ‘casual conversation’ between adherents of different faith traditions but involves a genuine hearing between persons of differing religious points of view with reference to what separates them as well as what unites them.

¹ *Jews and Christians in Conversation*, introduction.

For this purpose, I wish to focus on the ways in which difficult texts have been handled in the light of a particular strand of Jewish-Christian dialogue, and this in order to reflect briefly on the overarching theme of this symposium: the future of interfaith studies. The passages in question are found in John's Gospel, a text that ends with the life-affirming message that belief leads to life (20:31) and a text that forms the basis for much christological teaching in later centuries about Jesus' identity and significance. However, John's Gospel is often regarded as a poor basis, offering little hope, for Jewish-Christian dialogue. The teaching of contempt towards the Jews and Judaism, a teaching which developed over many centuries in popular and theological Christian proclamations, is often traced back to John's Gospel, with its antipathy towards those whom it describes as 'the Jews' as having encouraged anti-Jewish and later anti-Semitic accusations of Jewish displacement from the covenant for having rejected Jesus, claims to perpetual Jewish homelessness as a punishment for this rejection, or, as we shall see, the Satanization of the Jews. Nevertheless, given that dialogue (as defined earlier) must involve an open and honest encounter between people of different faith traditions, as well as the fact that John's Gospel belongs to the Christian canon of scripture, makes it all the more necessary to place John at the centre of that dialogue.

The issue of Johannine anti-Judaism has generated a wealth of research for several decades, particularly in the aftermath of the Shoah, and it focuses, more or less exclusively, on attempts to understand the overtly negative and polemical presentation of 'the Jews' in the Gospel of John. The terms *Ioudaios/Ioudaioi* (Jew/Jews) occur approximately seventy times within the Gospel, far more than the other canonical gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), and over half of these occurrences refer to an unbelieving group of characters and bear a strongly negative connotation as the opponents of Jesus. They are linked with negative aspects within the Gospel: blindness (9:39; 12:40), darkness and death (12:36; 8:24), murderous intent (5:18; 7:1, 20; 8:37), even diabolical origins, culminating in the bitterly caustic accusation made by Jesus in the eighth chapter: 'You are of your father the devil' (8:44). Moreover, John's use of the term 'the Jews' is undifferentiated, failing to distinguish between religious groups such as the Pharisees and the Sadducees; the fact that the same word – *Ioudaioi* – occurs several times in a variety of contexts tends to blur the nuances implied by these contexts and to generalize the meaning to its broadest possible referent – the Jews as a nation or ethnic group defined by a set of religious beliefs and practices. It is the intensity of these negative and undifferentiated references to the 'Jews' that, throughout history, has highlighted their capacity for re-contextualisation as anti-

Jewish and ultimately anti-Semitic polemic. This is what makes it a 'dangerous' text (note at this point Elvira Bauer's picture book – to promote its anti-Semitic agenda, Nazism frequently justified its hatred of the Jews on the basis of Scripture and Christian attitudes towards Judaism).

Among the many attempts to diffuse the anti-Jewish potential of the Johannine text a concerted effort is often made to establish that whatever it signifies, it does not represent the views of the historical Jesus of Nazareth (whom most scholars regard as far removed from the much later interpretation of Jesus provided by the Gospel of John). Others, furthermore, find the use of the term 'anti-Judaism' with reference to John's Gospel to be problematic in that it openly refers to Jesus and his disciples as Jews; it does not, moreover, reject Judaism as a religious system but appropriates many of its traditions, particularly those linked to the Jewish Scriptures.

Much of the discussion centres, however, on the troublesome references to 'the Jews'. Some attempts have been made to de-emphasize, even demythologize, John's negative use of the designation 'the Jews', opting rather for its symbolic significance as a cipher for unbelief over and against belief. However, while John does mythologize two modes of existence (believing and unbelieving) he does so by identifying them as two historically and empirically distinct communities: the Jewish community and the Johannine Christian community. In other words, to understand the term 'the Jews' as a cipher for unbelief and rejection is to overlook the historical particularity of the Gospel story.

Alternatively, given that 'the Jews' (or *hoi Ioudaioi*) - that is, those described in negative terms - are clearly Jewish but do not represent all Jewish people (Jesus and his disciples are not among 'the Jews'), it is becoming increasingly widespread to propose the rendering 'Judaean', in that in most cases they are residents of Judaea (over and against Galilee, for instance). This amounts to a case of 'linguistic ecology', with the hermeneutics of translation often practised in the field of Jewish-Christian relations when the language user shows acute awareness of the force of his/her language. However, the attempt to identify Jesus' opponents with reference to their geographical location (Judaea) rather than their religious-ethnic identity (their *Jewishness*) is rejected by several Jewish commentators (including Amy-Jill Levine and Adele Reinhartz), on the grounds that, ethically, it 'whitewashes' the text of its association with centuries of anti-Semitism. A post-Shoah hermeneutic, it is argued, must contend with the Gospel's troubling afterlife (hence the need to translate *Ioudaioi* not as 'Judaean' but as '*Jews*').

The narrowing of the referent to 'the Jewish religious [synagogue] authorities' (i.e. 'the Jews' of whom other Jews live in fear) belongs to the widely accepted

claim that the vitriolic references to 'the Jews' within John's narrative reflects a particular socio-historical setting at the time of the Gospel's composition around 80-90 CE (and one very different from that of Jesus himself, around 30 CE). That is, it reflects an inner-Jewish conflict – a kind of family feud – between synagogue Jews and those (the Johannine Christians) who have been expelled from the synagogue. The Gospel's original audience, it is claimed, had been part of the Jewish synagogue but was then expelled from its religious community. Thus, John's Gospel was written in response to the exclusion of these believers – a defensive and threatened community attempting to reshape its identity in isolation from its previous home, the Jewish synagogue. The resulting implication of this approach is that the author of John's Gospel is not vehemently anti-Jewish but offers a response to a specific crisis in Jewish-Christian relations. Evidence for such a proposed scenario centres on three references within the Gospel narrative to Jesus believers being 'cast out of the synagogue' (9:22; 12:42; 16:2) - but the claim that these references mirror actual historical circumstances are impossible to verify due to the lack of contemporaneous Jewish or early Christian supporting evidence. The question is therefore frequently posed whether hermeneutical priority should be ascribed to the Gospel's historical setting when that setting can only be spoken of in speculative terms.

Scholarly efforts at explaining the referent of the term 'the Jews' in John's Gospel have therefore been varied, with some receiving wider approval than others. However, it does not change the tone of the Gospel; what it does is seek to give an account for that tone.

- (1) This raises an important question as far as the future of Jewish-Christian relations is concerned (and is a matter of far-reaching consequences moreover for other interfaith relations): where is the toxicity of such texts to be located? In the text itself or in its reception or afterlife? Philosophical hermeneutics (Paul Ricoeur) teaches us that language, once inscribed, transcends its authorial moorings and creates 'a surplus of meaning', open to be recontextualized in ever-new situations. Some New Testament scholars may have set forth a fairly robust case for arguing that the harshness of the Johannine text is somehow mitigated by an appreciation of the possible historical situation of its original audience, and that it is a misreading of John's Gospel to suggest that it is anti-Jewish *per se*. However, it is a misreading that has all too easily arisen in the history of Christianity and is one that has been perpetuated in popular perceptions of Judaism, including a variety of literary and artistic forms. Is it enough to conclude that perhaps the best we can do is to approach John's text with an informed

- appreciation of its complex history and, at the same time, with full awareness of its dangers if 'heard uncritically'? Texts like John's Gospel can certainly be dissected, but it is a far more challenging task to disarm them.
- (2) Secondly, scholars engaged in the study of Jewish-Christian relations often ask whether their questions and discussions can assist other religions as they grapple with their own inheritance of conflict and hostility. It is noted that more cross-fertilization is necessary, given that Jews and Christians have achieved a significant measure of mutual respect and solidarity in the face of permanent differences. Thus the ground rules that have allowed this dialogue to prosper should be transferable to other interfaith discussions, albeit without glossing over the particularities of Jewish-Christian dialogue.
- (3) Scholarly debates such as those centred on the Jewishness and anti-Jewishness of John's Gospel raise a significant question as to the role of biblical (and other textual) scholars in discussions of interfaith relations, even if those engaged in the task include voices from every facet of Judaism and Christianity. If John's Gospel, like other scriptural and canonical texts, now stands on its own, in isolation from the situation that occasioned its writing, what role is played by these myriad attempts at minding or even bridging that gap? Much valuable scholarly work has been done on these difficult issues – even formal declarations and guidelines have been issued in an attempt to combat negative attitudes and prejudices – but those involved in the study of Jewish-Christian relations acknowledge that there is still a long way to go for all this to be percolated from the monographs, the journal articles, and even from denominational consultations, leading then to their implementation in wider segments of communal life. But also, stated differently, if dialogue is an activity to be experienced and lived as much as analysed and evaluated: who should in fact be the participants or partners at the table of interfaith dialogue?
- (4) Let me conclude by returning to a point I made briefly at the beginning of my presentation. And that is that dialogue and even discussions of interfaith dialogue cannot be limited to the areas of common ground, which then allows practitioners to avoid the challenging and even dangerous questions. Too often a safe subject is chosen for discussion. It must be acknowledged, as Jewish-Christian relations have indeed demonstrated over the past few decades, that interfaith dialogue also involves the study of particularities and of wrestling with difference. Dialogue cannot simply be about respect and tolerance, because interaction with the religious 'other' or 'others' has to be open enough to acknowledge that clear differences will also have to

be exposed - and the challenge that continues to be faced in interfaith relations is how to enter into dialogue precisely with reference to those differences, particularly those with a long and painful legacy.